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Iran Brought Superpowers Close to Blows

Three years ago, the United States and the Soviet Union maneuvered dangerously near the edge of war over Iran.

The story began on April 25, 1980, with the attempt to rescue American hostages from Iran. The day after the disaster in the desert, writes former national security affairs adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, "I convened a meeting in my office, on the instruction of the president, to plan another rescue mission."

Brzezinski had always argued not only for a rescue raid but also for a larger, punitive military assault. "The actions that made the most sense to me," he recalls, "involved seizing Kharg Island, Iran's main oil-export facility, and imposing a naval blockade, possibly combined with some air strikes."

In strict secrecy, preparations for a second mission began at training camps from Florida to California. But there were leaks. Newsweek quoted "a senior administration official" who also discussed a new rescue attempt. "I think," he said, "it will be October or November before the factors are favorable as they are

now with respect to wind, temperature and length of night."

The Soviets were not fooled. Our National Security Agency intercepted some secret Soviet messages. It was clear from these intercepts that the Kremlin was fully aware of what was happening.

The Kremlin reacted by shifting men and materiel from Europe to the edge of Iran and deploying half of its Afghanistan forces close to the Iranian border.

Clearly, the Soviets were preparing for a military confrontation in Iran. But was this merely a bluff to deter President Carter from taking military action against Iran?

Carter asked the Defense Intelligence Agency to "study and report on possible Soviet military reactions to various scenarios in which the United States forces have invaded Iran." Back came a warning that the U.S. action likely would lead to a nuclear confrontation.

On the way to the president's desk, the nuclear reference was mysteriously removed from the DIA's response. But what remained was sobering enough. Carter was told that the Soviets could be expected to retaliate with a major air and ground assault. Still, he didn't slow his military preparations.

Carter's top military advisers said they feared that he was embarked on a course that could result in a debacle so inextricable, a prospect so

dangerous that they resorted to desperate measures. They slipped classified information to me about Carter's plans.

On August 18, 1980, I began a series of columns about Carter's secret preparations for an October action in Iran. "The ostensible purpose," I wrote, "is to rescue the hostages, but the operation would also exact military retribution."

The White House issued the expected denial, howling in outrage at my "grotesque and absolutely irresponsible" stories. Yet, even as I wrote, the Soviet commanders on the Iranian border were going through some menacing exercises. These were described later by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a top-secret report:

"In August, 1980, an unusually long and complex general staff-controlled command post exercise featuring a mock national Soviet invasion of Iran was held in the trans-border area."

Though the Joint Chiefs saw "no indication that an invasion is imminent," the exercise was taken as a warning to Carter to abandon his "October coup."

Whether my writings or the Soviet threat finally convinced Carter to abandon his October adventure, the important thing is that it was called off. The incendiary was removed. The tensions cooled. And the hostages eventually were freed.